Characters

- LUTHER Moms' piano player. A street speaker. A friend.
- ADELE Moms' dresser-housekeeper. A relative. A friend.
- MOMS MABLEY Herself.

TIME: 1970...before and after.

SET

The set serves as a theatre, dressing room, Moms' home, Expressway, a street, a hospital, a church, a cemetery,...any scene needed. Mom's home is Center S˙ ....but the characters are free to use any area of the stage, after any given space is established. Theatre stages are S˙ C˙, HARLEM is S˙ R˙, Hospital is S˙L˙ Set suggests periods in the life of Moms...Black theatre from minstrelsy, T˙ O˙ B˙ A˙ Time, vaudeville, television and motion pictures. Picture blow-ups cover much of the upstage wall in black and white, sepia tone, dim color, old fashioned overstated billboard ads etc˙ The illustrations frame and spill over the stage, lead down into the audience... fan out over the walls, finally diminishing into a few isolated, single shots. Two dated, black-face, comedy-tragedy masks may be displayed at unmatching angles.

On stage are dress racks of costumes, from turn of the century until the mid-seventies, to be shared, as needed, by Adele and Luther. Some costumes may not be used but are there for atmosphere, glitz, glitter...and period suggestion; feather boas, top hats, men's hats and suits, minstrel outfits etc˙ There are many varieties of Moms favorite i˙d˙, the pull-down, stingy brim hat, ranging from smart felt and tweed to tramp style. Some hats are flower trimmed, one is black and covered by a mourning veil. Under the racks are shoes...particularly Moms other i˙d˙, floppy, oversized, soft men's shoes, sneakers, bedroom slippers... and a pair of black dress shoes.

Stage right and left are two old screens which serve to cover exits and as on-stage dressing areas, they are low enough to reveal players shoulders and heads. On the outside of the old screens are poster pix of famous and not so famous entertainers of several eras. The general effect is one of old, but vibrant splendor. There are three straight back chairs and a lounge chair which may serve as Mom's home chair, a hospital bed (?); there's also a folding card table, and a street speaker's step ladder with a small, fold-down, American flag. We also see a radio, the back view of a T˙V˙ set, and a dated phonograph. Luther's upright piano and bench, S˙ R˙ is angled, so the audience can see his face. By simple, seemingly casual, choreographic walking and use of chairs, clothing and needed props... the actors smoothly set up their scenes as they move (in character or in transition) to establish the next set to be played.

Act 1

ACT I

(A Theatre)

Lights slowly up. We hear a sound recording of MOMS singing. The music fades when lights are almost full. LUTHER enters through the audience, he carries his music sheets, and a well stuffed paper portfolio. He goes on stage, rests music and portfolio on top of the piano, examines the instrument...fingers keyboard, ...calls out to different off-stage areas...as he sits down to play.

LUTHER

Mrs˙ Mabley?

(reconsiders title, to himself)

...Moms Mabley?

(softly)

...Moms?

(louder)

Misss Maybley?

ADELE

(O˙S˙)

She's not here!

LUTHER

(Trying out piano)

When...when will she be here?

ADELE

Sit down and wait!

(LUTHER starts playing "PIANO PLAYER". ADELE enters... beautifully dressed in a dark blue silk maid's uniform, with old-rose lace cap and apron.)

LUTHER

(Stops playing to admire Adele)

Oh, now...and a-well, well well.

ADELE

Oh, go on and play.

(LUTHER DOES PIANO NUMBER)

LUTHER

I'm her new piano player.

ADELE

Not so fast. You hope, you wish, reckon, maybe and perhaps.

(Removes her lacy cap and apron)

This crap feels un-natural. I been scrubbin the dressin room toilet, dressed like for a musical comedy.

LUTHER

I sure need this job.

ADELE

What'd you bring for Moms?

LUTHER

A song and a message from her manager.

(Reads outside of portfolio)

"Hello, Moms, here is your new piano player.

ADELE

What'd you bring from YOU. A present. She don't like no empty-handed man.

(To Audience)

Well, hardly ever.

LUTHER

Okay, what does she like?

ADELE

Flowers, perfume...a baked Virginia ham, a sweet potato pie... stuff like that.

LUTHER

I'm broke. How bout a bottle of wine?

ADELE

Never! No kinda likker...and no kinda dope...heroin, cocaine ...none-a that!

LUTHER

I'm clean...square and clean.

ADELE

She don't mind a little bitta herb, weed, reefer...

LUTHER

I'll go get flowers. Hey, how do I nail down this job?

ADELE

Be honest, play fair, and be true. You can miss a note on that piano, but don't miss a gig.

LUTHER

Got it.

(lightly)

Serious business.

ADELE

'Nother thing...she's kinda cheap.

(To audience)

Can squeeze a penny till Lincoln screams.

(To Luther)

Don't plan on gettin rich.

LUTHER

(To Audience)

Maybe I'm not gonna like this.

ADELE

(Calls after him as he exits the way he entered.)

But she's a good old gal. Hey! Bring me back a grape soda... whilst I finish unpackin.

(ADELE and LUTHER exit. LIGHTS UP brighter. "PIANO PLAYER" TAPE comes in softly and out. MOMS enters, beautifully dressed, mink stole, diamond rings, lovely suit, carries gloves, beautiful bag, the picture of quiet good taste and prosperity.)

MOMS MABLEY

(Addresses audience)

My chauffeur didn't show up. Poor Moms had to ride a broke-down taxi-cab. Bet that Adele's sneaked off to goof with some guy. Havin herself a ball on my time, at my expense. and the piano player ain't even showed up. I tell you...your own will do it to you, do you IN.

(Removing hat etc˙)

The cab fare was nine dollars and seventy five cent. I hand the driver ten dollars, he gave me back a quarter. I said...keep the change. He said, "No, Moms, that's your change. I know damn well you gon tip me more than that." That's how your own do you. Course, if he wasn't my own, the taxi wouldn't-a stopped a-tall.

(pauses)

Adele? Children, If you want a job done poorly... ...hire one of your own to do it. If you don't want it done a-tall ...hire two.

(Laughs)

Aw, it's mean out here.

(During the following she's undressing and dressing to become MOMS)

I took the taxi cause...well, last week I was WALKIN, this, big, overgrown boy stop me... "Oh, Moms, please help me, gimmie some money. I got no motha, no fatha, no place to stay, ain' got nothin in the world ....but this gun. I had to help him. Negroes and raw onions will make you cry...and white folks and green apples will make you sick. When I was a child, which I never was for long...

(Softly)

Adele, where the hell you at? I do not like to be alone. She knows that. Well, now, back to down home, Brevart, North Carolina. One time a poor fella waded way out in the river. He wasn't wrapped too tight, didn't have all his marbles, nobody home upstairs, out to lunch. Sure, he drowned. People say... "Ohhhhhhhh, that river was too deep." Children, it ain't the depth of the river that drowns us...it's the WATER. Tell the truth. Adele,...why the hell don't you show up so I can fire you?

(Puts on a wrapper(?)...hangs her clothing (?).

(Loudly)

Luther!

(softly)

...Luther? Where's my new piano player? Takin advantage of my good nature. Tell the truth. If I was white... they'd be smilin on me... "Oh, what can I do for you, MISS Mabley?" I oughta blow my police whistle...call nine-one-one... call the law.

(Lights up and down as she continues to dress...putting on her funny shoes. Lights steady as...Luther enters through audience with a bouquet of flowers and a six pack of grape soda.)

LUTHER

Flowers for Miss Mabley! Flowers!

(Adele enters from off-stage... carrying a costume and a shawl)

ADELE

Moms, darlin, sugar pie, everything's unpacked and ready.

(Throws scarf around Moms)

And don't you be catchin cold.

MOMS MABLEY

(Accepts Luther's flowers. She stands, with arms out-stretched, looks heavenward and dramatically converses with God.)

Lord, you see Moms standin down here? God-baby, if there's one thing all heaven knows...I love my people,

each and every one.

(Raises her right hand)

See this here musician? I promise you, He's found hisself a home... here with Moms, as long as life shall last...

(Pulls her hand down, carefully qualifying)

...that's providin he passes his audition. This other child is my right arm.

(Luther runs to piano and starts playing.)

Luther, stop that noise!

(He continues to play.)

Boy, you hear me? Luther!

LUTHER

Oh...I'm sorry. My name's not Luther, its...

ADELE

She calls all her piano players Luther. Might-a been..ten, twelve, fifteen Luthers fore you. Like I'm the ninth Adele.

MOMS MABLEY

Yeah, keep it simple. Hard enough to remember my act. 'thout worryin bout names.

LUTHER

No, no, no. How'd you like someone to change your name?

MOMS MABLEY

(To audience)

Like it or not, mine's been changed. A boy-child's born and he knows who the hell HE is...for the rest-a his no-good life...

(laughs)

Say he get married seven times...he's forever MISTER Jones. But me, A poor woman, gotta change my name all the time. First you name for your father, then you marry that MISTER Jones. He might walk out on you. Then comes divorce. Next time you Mrs˙ Smith, Mrs˙ Green, Mrs˙ Johnson, or Mrs˙ Whosis. You never know who the hell you are cause, dammit...we always somebody else.

(Laughs)

Aw, it's mean out here.

ADELE

(To Luther)

Mom's name is Jackie Mabley.

MOMS MABLEY

No, such a thing. Once my name was Loretta Mary A-I-K-E-N, Aiken. I ran away from home, Brevart, North Carolina. Oh, but I did. Just fifteen years old. All I knew was how to make folks laugh. So, I went to workin in minstrels, vodeo shows...that was vaudeville. Dancin, singin, buckin and wingin. Ohhhhhh, Vamp it for me, boy. Take me right on back to a old memory. And a-one and a-two, and-a hit-it! Here we go! Yeah, nice and easy...

(MOMS goes into a minstrel shuffle, comic steps. Luther plays. Adele puts on a hat, 1915 vintage. MOMS is now fifteen years old...in a minstrel.)

LUTHER

Do it, Moms!

MOMS MABLEY

(Demonstrating)

I learned my jump-ups, walk-arounds, hops, runs, slapstick, turns, how to use bells, whistles, the noisemakers, how to mugg, strut, shimmy-shake, hand-wave, eye-ball...and just look simple. I'd go out with partners to give the crowd a few yaks before the master-comedians come on. Like say Butterbeans and Susie. Butter would shrink hisself down and in small, wore a chain and padlock cross the fly of his big, baggy trousers. His wife Susie pulled herself up tall and bossy..."Hey, Butter, come back yere! Where you think you goin! I got your key!" Me, I was with the small-timers. We had a skit...This yere lady goes in a ole beat-up hotel and ask for a room. Rooms ain't had no numbers, just letters... Room A, B, C, and so forth. And they ain't had no bell-hop. The manager called this old guy. "Hey, Pop, take this lady up to letter P˙" Pop say..."To let her pee!?" Manager say..."I mean letter ‘P’ over the door. ‘Pop say, "Let her pee over the door?" Manager say ..."Stop that discombobulatin confluscation. Take the lady up to letter "P" over the transom." Old Pop say..."Let her pee over the TRANSOM!? Hell, I'm a old beer drinkin man, and I can't do that!’" Then the chase would be on.

(Mom goes into chase steps, runs etc˙ Blows whistle, uses a noisemaker and ends with a flare of the tambourine. Moms is enjoying a good laugh. She holds Luther spellbound.)

Nother skit was a fella walkin long with a friend. He stammers ...."Loo-loo-loo-look-a, looka that, that, that... pre-pre-pre-pretty girl." His friend say..."Where?" He say, "Oh, she, she gone now." Then he say..."Loo-loo-loo-look-a that, that, that fu-fu-fu-fine horse and carriage." Friend say..."Where?" Fella say... "Oh, oh, oh, it gone now." Then he say...Loo-loo-looka-that, that..." Friend say..."Yeah, yeah, yeah, I saw it!" Fella say..."If, if, if you saw it, then why'd-ja step in it?"

(Blows her police whistle.)

Then we'd chase him and the band would play.

(Lifts skirts, runs in place.)

Some folk call that stereo-type, like my second cousin Edna.

(to audience)

Children, never will I forget the day she dropped in to see the show...then came to see ME after it was over.

(Adele, now Edna, sits next to Mom)

MOMS MABLEY

(A bit worried)

Cousin Edna, you saw the show,.. didn'tcha?

EDNA

Yes, the man with the padlock on his pants...and his wife holding the key.

MOMS MABLEY

Butterbeans and Susie.

EDNA

And I saw YOU, cousin Loretta.

MOMS MABLEY

(With a weak smile)

I was there.

EDNA

You were very funny.

MOMS MABLEY

(hopefully)

Thank you.

EDNA

(Sadly)

But,...in such a loud, vulgar, indecent way.

MOMS MABLEY

Oh.

EDNA

(In a kindly manner)

Some family members don't like you using the Aiken name for this. Your father was an outstanding citizen of Brevard. He owned businesses, built a fine home, was looked up to by whites as well as coloreds and..

MOMS MABLEY

I know.

EDNA

Why don't you use another name?

MOMS MABLEY

What name?

EDNA

(A bit impatient)

Make up one. Just drop Aiken... if you plan to blow whistles and tell jokes for a livlihood. It's bad for the race, as well as your family.

MOMS MABLEY

I'll change my name.

EDNA

We'll keep on keeping your two children. They're just fine. Your mama, grandmama...all of us want you to come back home...when you weary of this.

(Gives Mom's a farewell kiss.)

So long, my dear.

(Leaves with a sad headshake)

(Adele removes "Edna" hat. The two women are now back with LUTHER)

MOMS MABLEY

(To audience and Luther)

Later on...Jack Mabley...was a boyfriend-a mine. He never gave me nothin, so I took his name. I became Jackie Mabley. When I grew older, I called myself "Moms".

(She and Adele go to work on Luther's feelings.)

I wanted to be a mother to all who sometime feel lost.

ADELE

(Softly sings as MOMS dabs at her eyes with a kerchief and steals peep-looks at Luther.)

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long ways from home, A long ways from home.

MOMS MABLEY

Sing heartache.

MOMS MABLEY

(Dabs at her eyes)

And if I could travel through the hard, rocky years...and leave poor little Loretta Mary Aiken...to become Moms Mabley, dammit, you can be Luther.

ADELE

Yeah, just like I'm bein Adele.

LUTHER

(Very touched)

Joe Glazer, your manager, sent you this portfolio.

MOMS MABLEY

Yeah. Now, let's audition.

(laughs)

Oh, what's your name? Whatcha want me to call you.

LUTHER

(Riffles the keys)

I composed this for you. I'm callin it..."To Moms from...LUTHER."

(He plays and sings. MOMS and ADELE ...listen until music goes into a change and MOMS cuts into a dance step.)

TO MOMS FROM LUTHER

You may not be a glamor girl
But you are a star
Mom, you set my heart a-whirl
With all those crazy things you are
You may not wear the Dior line
But honey, you've come far
No one could be so very fine
As all those crazy things you are

Other gals buy sable coats, because they need them, they do
Diamonds, pearls and riverboats, short dresses of every hue
They need all that and a rhinestone hat
But, honey, they can't shine like you

You'll never be a flashy girl
Belle of any corner bar
But you're the best in the world
With all those crazy things you are
You cannot be a clinging vine
But the door to my heart's a-jar
Oh, lovely lady, forever be mine
With all those crazy things you are

MOMS MABLEY

(Pleased)

Well, you don't play any worse than I sing. We'll make out.

(Breaking seal on paper portfolio)

LUTHER

Hey...Moms is also a dancer.

ADELE

And can waltz...that ballroom style...

MOMS MABLEY

Aw, no such-a thing.

(Hugs portfolio)

Good old Joe Glazer. Next to God, Joe Glazer's my favorite.

LUTHER

Aw, Moms, don't say that.

MOMS MABLEY

Why? What's the matter? Are you anti-Semitic?

LUTHER

(Puzzled)

No, Mam.

(Moms is in the process of taking money out of folder, Luther is all eyes. She riffles a sheaf of bills.)

MOMS MABLEY

Now, let's talk salary.

LUTHER

I was carrying all that cash?

MOMS MABLEY

I don't like checks, they nothin but paper. Checks can bounce. And don't trust these damn banks either. I came through the depression.

LUTHER

(Hopefully)

I...I...I never work for minimum...

MOMS MABLEY

And that's exactly what I pay...and gonna take forty dollars a week off-a that for your room and board.

LUTHER

What room and board?

MOMS MABLEY

If we work together, what's wrong with livin together and eatin together It's an old fashioned custom called "family". Tell me, can you drive a car?

LUTHER

yes.

MOMS MABLEY

Adele, fire the chauffeur and give Luther FREE room and board. Boy, you're movin on up.

LUTHER

I can't drive your car and play piano.

MOMS MABLEY

Not both at the same time, course not. I got a Rolls Royce, I'll letcha have it to show off sometime.

LUTHER

Well, working for you, and boarding in...I might be able to add to my tape collection.

MOMS MABLEY

What's that?

LUTHER

I interviewed some great comedians...Dusty Fletcher, Slappy White...

MOMS MABLEY

Yeah, yeah, I know em all and they all know me. Why?

LUTHER

(Working on Moms)

I'd like the tapes to discover the heart, as well as the art, of comedy...What makes a top comedian, the heights and the very depths of genius?

MOMS MABLEY

Not WHAT makes...it's WHO makes. God-baby, made comics, same like he made presidents, bill collectors, lawyers, prostitutes, politicans, seamstresses, movie stars, pimps, doctors, winos, and piano players with tapes. God-baby made us all...to mix up the world and keep it lively.

ADELE

(Setting up the "at home" atmosphere for the later card scene.)

Oh, it's plenty lively. Now...tape collectors.

MOMS MABLEY

Son, your search is over. I can tell you what makes a great comedian...cause I'm the main one who knows. Any questions on that matter, ask me...anytime, morning, noon or night.

LUTHER

You had two kids by the time you were fifteen?

MOMS MABLEY

That had nothin to do with comedy. Yeah...I did.

LUTHER

Were they twins?

MOMS MABLEY

No. Let's change the subject. Luther, round here, things go my way...so, don't crowd me. Don't try to carry me too fast. Now, shall we work together? Is it okay, or no-kay?

LUTHER

(Sings and plays)

I DON'T WANT TO BE MAD WITH YOU

I don't want to be mad with you
I refuse to start a fight
If you're trying to say we're through
I won't help you tonight
I don't want to be mad with you

Though your heart has turned to stone
If you're trying to say we're through
You'll have to say it all alone Your words are sharp, they pierce my heart, my poor aching heart I know you know, I love you so, I can't let you go I don't want to be mad with you, darling it is plain to see What you're asking me to do tonight, is let you get away from me.

LUTHER

Okay or nokay? It's okay, Mom, you win.

MOMS MABLEY

We all win, together.

(They all clasp hands)

The ride to Harlem

(Adele arranging chairs to serve as "Rolls Royce". Two in front for Luther and Adele. One in back for Moms.)

ADELE

How you like livin with Moms?

LUTHER

SHE'S all right.

ADELE

See, I told you.

MOMS MABLEY

(To audience)

He got a job, his own room, the keys to my car, home cookin, and the pleasure of my company. He Done fell into a tub-a butter.

(Luther holds "door" open for Moms, then takes drivers seat. Adele takes her seat.)

MOMS MABLEY

Luther! By now, after two weeks, you think you know your way from Westchester down to Harlem?

LUTHER

(Chants as they ride.)

The throughway south, then route 95, next... the Cross Bronx Expressway... we exit Amsterdam Avenue, make a left on to Harlem River Drive...to 155th. Street. Then it's Harlem... and that's a long way to go to buy five pounds of collard greens.

ADELE

They sell em round here. She just wants to go to Harlem.

MOMS MABLEY

Right. Buy black. That's my public. I used to do five shows a day, seven days a week, at the Apollo Theatre; for eighty bucks...and was a head-liner. Luther! Traffic light.

LUTHER

I see it.

MOMS MABLEY

Red means stop.

(Their bodies indicate when they stop, start, turn etc˙)

LUTHER

I know.

MOMS MABLEY

Now it's green. That's go. 'Dell, read the grocery list.

ADELE

Spareribs, chicken, ham hocks, neckbones...

MOMS MABLEY

And collard greens.

ADELE

Also sausage, coconut bread, West Indian peppersauce...

MOMS MABLEY

Not so fast, Luther, we wanta get there.

LUTHER

Just forty miles an hour, Moms.

MOMS MABLEY

If the Lord wanted us to fly, we'd have wings. 'Dell, put down ...a case-a grape soda for Luther, so he can relax when we play cards.

LUTHER

I don't like cards that much, or grape soda either.

MOMS MABLEY

(They bounce)

You hit a pothole. Boy, you gon bust my springs! I can't tell enough jokes to buy another Rolls Royce.

LUTHER

Sit back and enjoy the ride.

MOMS MABLEY

(Tries to sit back)

Okay. What's your favorite card game? I play pinochle, tonk, gin rummy, blackjack, cooncan, hearts, bid-whist and POKER... ante, nickle limit.

LUTHER

I don't like to gamble.

MOMS MABLEY

Penny ante, five cent limit. Turn in here for the thruway.

ADELE

That's the exit.

LUTHER

Now, here it is..

(They turn)

MOMS MABLEY

Let the other car go first...don't cut in...wait....hold it... Now! Hurry!...Go on!

(SOUND...brakes screeching)

LUTHER

Almost made that guy side-swipe us.

MOMS MABLEY

(Shouts to other driver)

Racist! He saw we were all black.

ADELE

I think he's black too.

MOMS MABLEY

Racist right on.

(shouts answers to other driver)

And YOUR mother too! Rude thing. Slow down, Luther! Let him go on!

LUTHER

I'm down to thirty.

MOMS MABLEY

I got a pacemaker in my chest, don't blow my battery.

ADELE

(Answering Luther's inquiring look.)

She does have a pacemaker. Moms, me and Luther could have gone to Harlem alone.

MOMS MABLEY

And leave me by myself?

LUTHER

Oh, Oh,...policeman, a policeman on a motorcycle....

(They pull over to side. All look out and up at officer of the law.)

MOMS MABLEY

Ohhhh, may I have your autograph? police? I thought you were Robert Redford...out here makin some kind-a picture.

ADELE

Looks like him.

MOMS MABLEY

Drivin too slow?

(Luther is somewhere between a freeze and a slow burn.)

It's my fault, son. You must be related to Redford...

LUTHER

Mom, he wants to know where we are going.

MOMS MABLEY

To Grant's Tomb..that's at 124th. Street and Riverside Drive. I'm a volunteer worker...collectin money from the visitors... ...for the mother of the Unknown Soldier. Ohhhh, no...well, thankyou for the dollar, son.

(Salutes, hand to forehead)

Nice to have you aboard. Yessir, we'll drive faster. God bless.

(Car moves forward)

LUTHER

That was embarrasing. If the soldier is unknown, how would we know his mother?

MOMS MABLEY

Whoever she is, "she kept your butt outta jail. Put your hand out the window, to make your turn. I'm doin it back here, on the other side.

LUTHER

What the hell for?

MOMS MABLEY

So no one can pass us a-tall. Let's work on my new number... You know...dee-dum-dum-dum, dee-dee-dee...everything's hap'nin instantly.

LUTHER

(Sings)

Goin on instantly...

(Speaks)

Goin on is better...

MOMS MABLEY

I like hap'nin...

ADELE

Oh, Lord, oh, no.....another policeman...

(They pull over)

MOMS MABLEY

Ohhhhhh, may I have your autograph? Police? I thought you were Bill Cosby... out here makin some kinda movin picture... Where are we goin?

LUTHER

(Wearily)

To Grant's Tomb at 124th and....

MOMS MABLEY

(Punches Luther's shoulder)

No, we on our way to Harlem Hospital. Her grandmother, ninety seven years old, is on critical. She wants to see her one more time.

(Taps Adele...to cry. She obliges)

Don't cry no more, honey. Thank you, son. Yes, he'll drive better... Aw, just like Bill Cosby, God bless.

(SOUND...Harlem vendors selling wares.)

(SOUND TAPE INSERT HERE)

Sc˙ Harlem Walk SOUND: Tape of Street scene, gradual fade.

MOMS MABLEY

(Arms outstretched to...)

Harlem!

ADELE

Harlem!

LUTHER

Harlem! All out!

(LUTHER, MOMS, ADELE step out of car.)

MOMS MABLEY

Yall go on, get the groceries, whilst I make myself at home.

(LUTHER exits stage right for "stepladder" scene. ADELE ... slips on African robe... picks up African prints. She is now a street vendor.)

ADELE

(As she ties Gayli on head)

African prints! Gaylis! Dashikis! Claim your heritage!

MOMS MABLEY

Children! Children...Howdy-do, Hello everybody, ...I'm home.

ADELE

Moms! It's the lady! Ain't seen you since last time. Whatcha say?

MOMS MABLEY

Can't say. Whatcha know?

ADELE

Don't know. Where's that Luther? And where is Adele?

MOMS MABLEY

Off somewhere... spendin my up money.

ADELE

(At large, to the people)

Three dollars, three dollars...Yall come on now...buy somethin, three dollars...

(Moms gives her money and takes piece of material.)

MOMS MABLEY

So pretty.

ADELE

Thank you...Tie-dye. Moms, don't it look like the atomic bomb been dropped, smack dab?

MOMS MABLEY

I hear you, chile.

ADELE

Empty buildin's, and the people got no place to stay.

MOMS MABLEY

Yeah...goin from bad to worse...push fast comin to shove.

(LUTHER (S˙L˙) gets on a "step-ladder". He is a a very dynamic, angry street speaker...in the tradition of Malcolm X)

ADELE

(Pointing to SPEAKER)

And he tells it. He knows...Oh, he got it and gone.

LUTHER

Hey, everybody, don' run by so fast. LISTEN! I just saw a new-born baby. Born with a monkey on her back! Born hooked! Yall ready for that? Go on in the hospital and ask em if I'm lyin. Yeah, a doctor had to drain the blood from a brand new baby girl, had to fill 'er up with blood from a stranger! A blood transfusion to detoxify a brand-new, infant child! A baby born cryin for a fix. Are you ready for that? She got no home sweet home. Gonna send her to a FOSTER home...cause her mama and daddy are on the nod! Done messed up the seed!

MOMS MABLEY

Tell heartache! Tell the truth! Tell it!

LUTHER

Brothers! YOUR HONOR has got to mean somethin more than what you call a judge. Look at the frail old people, they scared to go out, afraid some STRONG, YOUNG man gonna rob em, kill em. OLD FOLKS scared-a their GRANDCHILDREN! Wave bye-bye to the baby, say goodbye to childhood. Wake up! Behold! Our children are goin down the drain! While yall talkin bout... "All I want is a piece-a the pie." Any lousy, rotten pie that somebody else cooks up. Bake your own damn pie! Help me, somebody, ...can I hear some kind-a amen?

MOMS and ADELE

Speak! That's right! ... Amen! Tell the truth! ... Teach and preach!

LUTHER

(To passing HECKLER)

Aw, shut up man, move, move on outta here! Yeah, I'm broke, broke, cause I'm not out here livin off your daughter's body, your son's veins...and what you stuffin up your nose! He's killin off the nation! He's killin YOU and YOURS! Yeah...and yall standin round smilin, admirin his car..."Oh, ain't he got a fine set-a wheels." Call his name out loud! Murderer! Child killer! Murderer!!

MOMS MABLEY

Murderer! Come on, fight! Fight, me!

ADELE

(Restrains her)

Oh, Moms, now...now...

LUTHER

That ain' no kind-a success story. He's eatin your children alive. Throw him in the same bag with the high-up, white-collar crime boys...the ones yall also cocktailin with and grinnin at. Y'know, read your newspaper, rich folks do not STEAL, MONEY... they "misappropiate funds". They do not run off with the loot ...they "ABSCOND with the assets". Stop goin so easy on liars, thieves and cold-blooded killers. I say freedom, try piece-a that pie. Freedom, it's hard to get but oh, it tastes so sweet. Freedom...Freeeeeedom! Freedom...now!

MOMS MABLEY

(Quietly, as LUTHER exits.)

Thank you, right on...and on.

ADELE

Make me laugh, Mom, I need to laugh.

MOMS MABLEY

It's gettin harder to find what's funny. On my way here, I saw a fella rob a bank. Whilst he was runnin to the get-away car, a policeman mugged him and "absconded with the funds".

ADELE

What? ...Where?

MOMS MABLEY

That's a joke. You said you wanted to laugh, right? I also saw a OLE man...lookin good. So I asked him, "Grampa, what's your secret? How you manage to stay here so long, lookin so fine?" He say, "I drink a quart-a whiskey every day, smoke plenty cigarettes and run with lotta different women." So I say...how old ARE you? He say... "Thirty one."

ADELE

(Exits laughing to prepare card scene)

You oughta stop your lyin.

MOMS MABLEY

(Now works to audience)

Talkin bout age, I ask a friend-a mine ..."How old is your youngest child?" She say..."Fifteen". I said..."Didn't your husband die twenty years ago? She say..."He dead, I ain't."

(laughs)

Yeah, it's mean out here. But Harlem's still got a little magic for me...and a lotta memories. Over, yonder, is the Hotel Theresa. I was livin there when Fidel Castro and Nikita Kruschev came up to visit Harlem. Sure I spoke to em...After all, if the big blow comes, no tellin what Country my butt might land in.

(With a wink)

I told Krusch...you wanta fight? Fight me. I'll fightcha...in Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, or any other foreign country. One day Castro met me in the hall..."Senora Mabley," He said, "I want to go cross the street to the Apollo to see your act. Order for me a box seat, gracias." Oh, yeah, I told him...Fidel, watch out for box seats...that's how Lincoln got it.

SOUND: Repeat tape of vendors. Plus church song and tambourine. "Won 'tcha be A witness Help me say Jesus gonna love you Every day... (Or other)

SOUND: Down and out behind following.

But lemmie tell you who can hurt you the most...those CLOSEST to you. Somebody you love, trust and putcha confidence in...like this Luther. As time goes by, things not goin so well. A while back, I got a sudden, unexpected bookin for a Tuesday night in Atlantic City. He didn't know nothin bout it. I do give him Monday and, Tuesday off. But he went and stayed out overnight, like a alley cat. Didn't call to say where he'd be. Bein secretive. I don't play that. Up to the last minute...I waited, then had to find some strange musician from Philly. Poor fella was spaced out... wierd. I'm singin one song and he's playin another. Thanks to Adele...I forgave Luther. Where had he been? Out doin a gig for somebody else, in Washington, D˙ C˙! All mealy-mouth, he

say, "Thank you, Moms, you a fine person to forgive and forget." I told him there's no way to forget...forget is a damn lie. I FORGIVE. The only way you can forget...is if your mind flips out. Yeah, he could-a said... "I got me a date for next. Tuesday." But no, he didn't, do that. Secretive. Now, that's the stuff you gotta watch.

SOUND: Fading out. Moms turns, removes her hat and joins Adele at home...for the CARDGAME SCENE.

Sc˙ CARDGAME...HOME. ADELE is setting out decks of playing cards. MOMS is changing into a long housecoat.

ADELE

So time heals all wounds, right?

MOMS MABLEY

Dell, I forgave him but it still hurts.

ADELE

It was his night off. He didn't know you got an extra job.

MOMS MABLEY

He shoulda asked. However, let's have us a good time tonight. I like seven card stud... red sixes and black fives WILD.

ADELE

You always win with wild cards.

MOMS MABLEY

(Gets large jar of loose change. Shakes it.)

Bein a good loser shows quality. Smile...compliment the winner... like those British tennis champions ..."Fine play, old chap." They might be eatin their damn hearts out...but it's..."Fine play, old chap."

ADELE

That's hard to do if you lost to the same person ten times in a row...like Luther's been losin to you.

MOMS MABLEY

Okay...dealers choice tonight. So he can choose that drat "Five card draw, nothin wild, play what you see!" It's a mean game. Nothin wild takes the hope outta things...just lookin at the naked truth.

ADELE

(Drops her voice)

Moms, he bought a little bit of scotch. Please don't say anything about him having a drink.

MOMS MABLEY

There's plenty of grape soda.

ADELE

He doesn't like grape soda.

MOMS MABLEY

Likker-heads don't like it cause there's no alcohol in it. We got pineapple, orange, cream soda... all kindsa drinks.

ADELE

(Setting out glasses etc˙)

Moms, you can't be boss every minute. Try to give in... remember those British Tennis players... "Fine play, old chap."

MOMS MABLEY

(Nods begrudgingly)

I'm lookin out for him.

ADELE

He can look out for himself. He's a grown man.

(LUTHER enters carrying a tape recorder, bottle of scotch.)

LUTHER

Hey, Moms. Let's work on our tape. The great comedians, you're number nineteen...

(as she glares)

I've taped eighteen before.

MOMS MABLEY

No, we gonna play Poker.

LUTHER

(Pours a drink)

This morning, after breakfast, you promised.

MOMS MABLEY

(To audience)

I ain't promised him nothin.

ADELE

(Counting cards, poker chips etc˙)

Yes, you did. I heard you.

MOMS MABLEY

Everybody's gettin so exact. Okay, do tapes in between cards... also rehearse my song...like you promised me.

ADELE

Tapes, rehearsal and poker?

LUTHER

(A bit selfconsciously pours a scotch.)

Anyone care to join me?

MOMS MABLEY

(With a forced smile)

Thanks but no thanks, ... old chap.

ADELE

(As Luther turns on tape recorder, Adele pours two grape sodas, and tips a splash of scotch in her glass.)

Just, to keep you company.

LUTHER

Grape soda and scotch.

MOMS MABLEY

(Counting change...also disapproves Dell drinking.)

Well, well, well.

LUTHER

(Glancing at a note pad)

Moms, how many children did you have?

MOMS MABLEY

That has nothin to do with comedy. Three girls and one adopted boy.

LUTHER

Where are they?

MOMS MABLEY

(Right into recorder)

Somewhere mindin their own business. I also have family in North Carolina, Cleveland, Ohio, upstate New York...brother, sisters, cousins...

LUTHER

They say...you didn't raise the children yourself...

MOMS MABLEY

(Puts down recorder)

I wish I could meet somebody named "they". No, I couldn't bunk babies in cold dressing rooms, Jim Crow railroad stations, and lousy hotels. I let other people HELP to raise em... people who knew more bout that than I did.

(A plea for understanding)

They were all born while I was still in my teens.

LUTHER

(Tips more scotch in glass)

And yet you adopted a boy?

MOMS MABLEY

(Holds off-button on tape R˙)

Dammit, my brothers child needed somebody when his father died. Listen, Luther, move on, get to the comedy part. My words are bein locked in this machine.

LUTHER

How old are you?

MOMS MABLEY

I'm not gonna tell you that.

LUTHER

Seems to me you'd be proud of your age.

MOMS MABLEY

Why?

(To audience)

All he has to do is keep sittin there... he'll get older.

LUTHER

(Jovial, teasing)

Okay, we'll skip that.

MOMS MABLEY

(To audience)

People beat you to death bout age...particularly if you a woman. That's why I tell "old man" jokes. Male comedians... they tell old mother-in-law and old wife jokes. But gettin old ain't no joke. At sixty folks are meaner to you than when you were fifty.Seventy will make sixty remember like good. If you get to eighty, better say you still seventy...cause the thing gon get grittier as you go along... If you don't it TELL a-tall that keeps outside interest alive. ..."I wonder how old she really is."... "Well, she ain' no chicken."... "Done been here since the flood."

(To Luther)

Worryin bout other people's age gives ignant, idle people something to do

(signifying)

...while they're workin for me.

ADELE

Soundin and signifyin. Let's play cards.

LUTHER

Oh, I just wanted the tapes to be honest.

MOMS MABLEY

(To audience)

Some "honesty" ain' nothin but jive. I'm sick-a readin them bigshot life stories, out to make a extra buck with some jive-ass "honesty". It's a hustle. Tellin us lotta bed-time and drug-time stories. "Once upon a time... I had nine hundred lovers and sexed each one a different way. A-like this, and a-like that, and blindfolded, through bifocals, in the light, in the dark, in a telephone booth, standin, sittin, walkin, ridin, flyin in a air-plane, and upside down on the tip-top-a the Chrysler Buildin. The whole country's on a lyin, phony SEX trip. Children, Folks that talk it up too much...they can't DO nothin. I'm tell in you. Let's play cards.

LUTHER

I have a question about sex...but let's skip it.

(He covers notes as Moms tries to peep.)

ADELE

(Sorting poker chips)

That's right. Enough is enough.

MOMS MABLEY

Ask it. Well?

ADELE

Oh, Moms, drop it.

MOMS MABLEY

Don't, hide nothin from me...in my house. Speak.

LUTHER

They say you...you are gay...I mean Lesbian.

MOMS MABLEY

Boy you got heart.

LUTHER

(To audience)

I knew I shouldn't-a said it...

(Tangles himself further by speaking to MOMS and Adele.)

It is a contradiction...I mean her having four children AND being a Lesbian...Oh, damn. I mean...IF you are, or ever WERE Gay, ...

(lamely)

...you couldn't have been very... dedicated. It... it's all right to be anything ...you want, really...I guess.

ADELE

Luther, Luther.

MOMS MABLEY

(Solemnly...turns on tape machine.)

As far as the sex subject, is concerned,...I'll say it once, and put it this way...Like the good Lord, Moms Mabley tried to love love EVERYBODY.

(Snaps off machine.)

Now, shuffle the cards.

(Luther pours another drink...a double)

ADELE

Luther, don't you have any peaceful questions?

(With an elegant air)

Like... "What do you hope to accomplish in the future? Or... "Tell us of your hopes and aspirations?"

LUTHER

I don't need fifty tapes on hopes and aspirations.

MOMS MABLEY

They're supposed to be about comedy and I haven't laughed YET. Play cards.

LUTHER

One more thing. For the youth of today...Moms, how did the old-timers feel about doing...Minstrel, carnival, vaudeville the stereotype kinda stuff...? I mean...since today's actors don't, do it anymore...

MOMS MABLEY

They still doin it...all dressed up, sneaky-like. Minstrel time is out there...in disguise. But I know what's in a joke, if you serve it to me in a brown paper bag, or on a silver platter.

LUTHER

How do you know?

MOMS MABLEY

When you're not highly educated, you have to use your mind.

LUTHER

No kiddin, how did you feel about stereotype?

MOMS MABLEY

I tried to get out of it. Put my own act together. A single. Laughin at who and what was funny to ME. That upped my chances... to vaudeville, club dates,...even churches. I had it all. Louis Armstrong, Satch, said, "Moms, you overworkin and underpayin yourself." He introduced me to his manager...Joe Glazer. Soon I got to know what Grover Cleveland's face look like.

LUTHER

Grover Cleveland?

MOMS MABLEY

One of our presidents. His picture's on a thousand dollar bill. On the one dollar you got Washington, on five is Lincoln, ten is Alexander Hamilton, on your twenty... Andrew Jackson, fifty is Ulysses Grant, one hundred...Benjamin Franklin, five hundred you got McKinley,...poor fella, he was assasinated. Five thousand is Madison and your highest denomination is a picture of Salmon P˙ Chase, smack-dab on...a ten thousand dollar bill. And I got one-a them stashed away in a safe deposit box.

LUTHER

You sure can remember faces on some money.

MOMS MABLEY

That's why they put em there, to be remembered. It's an honor. And they the only OLE men I want hangin round me.

LUTHER

Lady, you are too much. It sure would be a shame for you to carry all your untold information to the grave...

MOMS MABLEY

I don't intend to go to no grave. I'm gonna stay in this world one way or another, if the educated fools don't blow it up. Where's the Queen of Clubs?

(Adele hands it to her.)

LUTHER

I don't think I could have played in a minstrel show...

MOMS MABLEY

(Really into remembering)

In 1920? White folks wasn't doin nothin but slapstick, prat falls, Irish and Jewish jokes. They even played YOU in blackface. But I knew one colored fella who landed a job in the metropolitan opera House. Big, Black, handsome, and half-naked...he fanned Cleopatra with an ostrich fan. She didn't look like no Egyptian. Listed him on the program as a "Nubian" slave. Fannin this woman from the Bronx... or Brooklyn somewhere. Me, I'd rather do a soft-shoe dance on the corner of Lenox and one hundred twenty fifth than play "Nubian" slave in an opera. Poor fella, didn't have a note to sing or a damn word to say. Just fannin Cleopatra. Now that's what. I call a stereotype.

LUTHER

But you still can't compare opera to a minstrel show, no matter how you explain it...

MOMS MABLEY

I ain't EXPLAININ a father-grabbin thing to you or anybody else!

ADELE

Luther! PLAY CARDS! PLAY CARDS!

MOMS MABLEY

Yeah, dammit, PLAY CARDS! I'm gon whip on his hard-headed butt till he cries blood!

ADELE

We are going to have a nice, quiet, game.

LUTHER

(Pours a drink for himself)

Adele?

ADELE

Just a taste.

MOMS MABLEY

Well, well, well.

(Luther pours for Adele)

ADELE

Moms, Scotch is legal.

MOMS MABLEY

Go on, legal yourself to death. Luther, didn't eat much dinner. Drinkin on a empty stomach... that's no good.

LUTHER

(Shuffling cards)

I told you I don't, like pork, and that's all you buy. Ribs, pork chops, ham, bacon, chitterlings,...

MOMS MABLEY

We VOTE what to have...you just get OUTvoted.

(MOMS and ADELE laugh)

ADELE

Luther, what do you like?

LUTHER

My favorite is roast, duck.

MOMS MABLEY

(Winks at Adele)

I don't eat duck...cause...

(MOMS leads off singing. ADELE joins in)

MOMS and ADELE

Be kind to your web-footed friends
For a duck may be somebody's mother
They live in the dark of a swamp
Where the weather is always DOMP
You may think that this is the end
Well it ain't we gonna sing another chorus

Be kind to your web-footed friends For a duck may be somebody's mother
They live in the dark of a swamp
Where the weather is always domp
You may think that this is the end
Well it is.

ADELE

Okay, togetherness, right?

MOMS MABLEY

(Exchanging chips for money)

Poker! Buy your chips and ante up a penny. The house cuts the pot.

ADELE

(To Luther)

Tonight...Luther gets first deal...and it's dealer's choice.

MOMS MABLEY

I like seven card stud with all red Jacks, black treys, and every red Queen wild.

LUTHER

Why not make everything wild except the deuces?

MOMS MABLEY

That sounds good.

LUTHER

This is... five card draw, nothing wild...

MOMS MABLEY

"What you see is what you got."

LUTHER

Also...winner keeps the deal until he loses...okay?

ADELE

I don't care.

MOMS MABLEY

Oh, deal.

(LUTHER deals five cards to each...as they survey cards ...Mom tries to sneak a look at other hands but is

defeate During the following MOMS and Adele raise fingers to indica that MOMS wants 2 cards, ADEL needs three. LUTHER DEALS.)

MOMS MABLEY

I open for a penny.

ADELE

Ohhhh, I'm gone.

MOMS MABLEY

How many cards YOU want?

LUTHER

Oh, I think I'll play these.

(They discard, he deals two to Moms, two to himself.)

MOMS MABLEY

(Picks up Adele's spiked grape soda and drinks... by error, of course. Adele notices.)

I bet a nickle. Mmmmmm, this grape is refreshing.

ADELE

I said I' m gone.

(Turns down her cards)

LUTHER

Call your nickle and raise a nickle.

MOMS MABLEY

I love what. I see...so, I call and backraise five cent.

LUTHER

(Puts in two nickels.)

Call and up that.

MOMS MABLEY

Okay. Let's raise the limit and keep everybody honest.

ADELE

Not in the middle of a play.

(Gets knitting or crochet)

LUTHER

No limit, I don' care, let's gamble.

MOMS MABLEY

I say George Washington...one dollar.

LUTHER

See that and raise it five...Abraham Lincoln to you.

MOMS MABLEY

(Throws in five.)

I'm in. Turn out! Three aces and two queens.

(Reaches for money.)

LUTHER

Hold it. I got me four little deuces.

ADELE

Ohhh, watch him do it tonight!

MOMS MABLEY

(As Luther rakes in money)

Well, nice going,... old chap.

(Reaches for cards)

Now, seven card stud with everything wild except...

LUTHER

(Gathering cards)

No, no...Winner keeps the deal and it's dealer's choice. We playin five card draw, nothin wild, what you see is...

(Deals)

MOMS MABLEY

(Trying to be nice.)

"What you get." Adele, tomorrow... remind me to pay my cousins insurance policy, and mine too. Luther, you got life insurance?

LUTHER

(Dealing)

Not a bit. When I die I want everybody to feel sad.

(Adele and Luther laugh.)

MOMS MABLEY

(To audience)

I ain't got but one nerve left...and they workin on that. Dell, make a note to buy Luther a suit,...outta his pay. If he keeps wearin that one outfit, he's gon' look raggedy as a dish-a sauerkraut.

(To players)

Ante up. I open easy...a nickel.

LUTHER

How many cards?

ADELE

I'm gone.

LUTHER

Call...and it's up to the opener.

MOMS MABLEY

I always bite off more than I can chew...but I chew it.

(Surveying cards)

A nickle.

ADELE

I'm gone.

(Turns down)

MOMS MABLEY

You always put up a penny, then gone... leavin me with the vulture. The bet is now up to the one with no life insurance.

LUTHER

No limit, so... I call and raise fifty cents.

MOMS MABLEY

See that... and backraise your butt two dollars.

ADELE

(Tries to take MOMS "soda")

The weather's turnin rough.

MOMS MABLEY

(Saves her glass)

And you hush...cause you are out. What you crochetin, a tent?

ADELE

A bed jacket for you.

MOMS MABLEY

I ain't that big.

LUTHER

(With a sigh)

I'll see two dollars. Turn out.

MOMS MABLEY

Time for a change. Four nine spots.

(Reaches out for money)

LUTHER

Sorreeeeee. A Royal spade flush... There's a hard, black ace, an ebony king, his dark queen, a jackass, and a pretty ten of spades.

(Raking in and exulting)

Thanksgiving day at the races! Hooray for justice! Whoo!

(Applauds himself.)

MOMS MABLEY

(Getting angry.)

There is such a thing as being a good winner, nigger!

LUTHER

Now was that nice?

ADELE

Aw...Moms...

MOMS MABLEY

Oh, it's just an expression, that's all... "nigger". Dammit, I'm just havin some fun.

LUTHER

(Teasing)

I wouldn't call you that.

MOMS MABLEY

Let's play seven card stud...

LUTHER

(Cracking up)

No, the winner's gonna keep the deal mainly cause you called him that name.

MOMS MABLEY

You ain't heard no names yet...I'm bein nice...old chap.

(Gives a hiccup)

Drat bedjacket look more like a circus tent.

LUTHER

You want me to turn the deal loose and hand it over to you?

MOMS MABLEY

I can take it if I want. They my cards.

LUTHER

Well, then lets don't play.

ADELE

Stop, it's only a game. Let's quit.

MOMS MABLEY

No stoppin. Dell, you ain't even started...sittin every hand out, out, out. That's coward. Now, dammit, you knittin, and crochetin bed blankets...

ADELE

Moms, you are drinkin likker. That is my glass. Grape soda with Scotch in it.

MOMS MABLEY

Yall gave me that?

LUTHER

Dell only had a teaspoon in it.

MOMS MABLEY

God-baby, they slipped me a Mickey Finn. No wonder he's winning.

(To Audience)

Watch the one closest to you. Fortune tellers say that. Outside enemies can't hurtcha. I am claspin a viper to my bosom.

ADELE

(Takes out incense sticks and lights them)

Time to burn incense, get the evil vibes outta here.

MOMS MABLEY

Dell, don' burn nothin. I'm gon tell my minister and spiritual advisor bout that. It's superstition.

ADELE

You don't have to tell on me to nobody. Incense is religion too.

MOMS MABLEY

I'll tell my minister anything I want.

LUTHER

(Having fun, enjoying the argument.)

Tell him! I'll meet your minister out in the alley. Who is he?

MOMS MABLEY

Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr˙ of the Abyssinia Baptist Church. Pick your alley...any alley...and you just better bring some rough men with you...cause he'll have his...the friends of Brother Malcolm X!! That's who he'll have for you!

LUTHER

Okay, games over, the fun's over.

MOMS MABLEY

I ain' Bo-peep, don' play me cheap! Nothin's over. I say when things be over.

(To audience)

All-a my life people been tryin to play kick-butt on me. He's not to say what's over and walk with my money.

(To Luther)

Dammit, and you missed my gig!

LUTHER

(Soves his winnings to her)

There, there's all I won. It's only money. You got it.

(Goes in his pockets)

Here's more pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln... Take all-a me....

(Adele is still fanning incense around room.)

MOMS MABLEY

(To audience)

He's talkin down to me! Lookin down his nose at me!

(To Luther)

The game is NOT over, it's on! Dell, you gon burn down this damn Westchester house...then where the hell we gon go? Games on! Dealer's choice! The tape is on! Tape your tape! And my rehearsal is on! I can tough it out under any and all circumstances. I don't do much runnin, hidin or cryin...

LUTHER

(Pouring himself another drink)

Yeah, they say colored women sleep with their fists balled up.

MOMS MABLEY

This one does! Balled up tight, case I have to wake up swingin! Luther, deal dammit! Bringin me flowers and writin pretty songs while you trample on me! Deal, dammit, deal.

ADELE

Deal, Luther.

MOMS MABLEY

You and me, the black brother and sister...we in this wicked world togetha...and we gon' meet head-on and see it through... without a psychiatrist, psychologist, or psy-SHIT. Lay out the future, deal!!

(Luther deals fast)

Now freeze! Don't pick up. Go to that piano and play my new intro.

LUTHER

The...The...The Instant Song?

MOMS MABLEY

That's it, or do you have another question bout my private life...before we start?

LUTHER

(While on the way to piano)

Yes! Were you ever married?

MOMS MABLEY

Hell, no! Now play "Instant".

LUTHER

(Bangs on piano as he sings)

INSTANT SONG
There's instant coffee, instant tea Everything's goin on instantly...

MOMS MABLEY

No! Everything's HAP'NIN!

LUTHER

GOIN ON...goddamit!

MOMS MABLEY

HAP'NIN! And don't use God-baby's name in vain in MY house. And that's MY song...

LUTHER

Like they were YOUR cards...

MOMS MABLEY

Not WERE, they STILL my cards. Play hap'nin.

LUTHER

(Still banging, he sings)

There's instant coffee, instant tea
Everything hap'nin instantly
So why, pretty baby, why pretty baby,
Why does it take you so long

There's instant, bread, instant rice There's instant bread, instant, rice...

(Moms peeps at Luther's cards, he notices.)

LUTHER

(Stops playing with a bang)

Put my cards down!

(MOMS drops cards to floor)

You'd rather cheat, beat me outta my bread, than accept it as a gift. You wanta play BIG-MAMA and be MIGHTY-MAMMY. What stands between us...YOU... flyin over my head like SUPER-MAN! Ain't she powerful! There she goes, SUPER-MAMMY!!

MOMS MABLEY

Don'tcha call me NO kinda Mammy, good as I been to you, nigga!

LUTHER

And callin me "nigga" everytime you open your mouth.

MOMS MABLEY

You been called names all your damn life...and ain' said shit...lotta names sides nigga...COON! DARKY! SMOKE! SPOOK! DINGE! SPADE! SHINE!...

LUTHER

Maybe I'm not as sensitive as you are. Y'know, there are names for whitefolk too...

MOMS MABLEY

Yeah, this is America, with somethin for everybody...honky ...gray, cracker, red-neck, pecker-wood, spic, wop, kike, chink, greaseball, yid, sheeny, gook, ... Gimmie a week, I'll tell it all. I deal in truth.

LUTHER

With everybody's truth but your own!

MOMS MABLEY

Callin me a stereotype!

LUTHER

I didn't...

MOMS MABLEY

(To audience)

I don't know a damn thing about him except he plays piano... ...and puts torn-up souls in machines. Like them

that clawed inta Bessie Smith, Florence Mills, Lady Day, Maw Rainey, Brick Top, and Josie Baker. Clawin at me, who suffered to make people laugh. "Oh, they don't feel nothin...they strong!"

(To Luther, mimics him)

"Were you ever married?"...I was raped at eleven years old! Used and abused... but I'm still here!

(Jumps in place to claim her right to exist.)

I am here!

(Turns on tape recorder.)

Tape it! Used and abused. Wasn't any court-house judge ready to give a "nigga-woman" child support in nineteen hundred and seven! Nothin was owed us from a black or a white man...and had their way with me...don'tcha know.

(Church-happy)

Yeah, I was strong. I thang-Gawd, for the strength to ball up both-a my fists,... to fight for some kind-a livli-hood... with Jim-Crow law against me. I thang-Gawd for the strength to find work for all you Luthers, to stay alive,...still out here findin it, with a machine in my chest to keep my heart goin. You lucky you alive behind that mighty-mammy, super-mammy stuff.

(To Audience)

I don't, believe in violence or guns...else I'd kill him!

(To Luther)

Callin me a mammy. A "Mammmy" brought you inta this world and another one is supportin you! Askin for a job and callin me "Mammmy" Where's your beggin bowl, nigga?!

LUTHER

(After a beat of silence)

Miss Mabley, I'm sorry I hurt you this much. So, I"m clumsy...but I can't let you break me down to nothin. I hurt too. I'm going out for a walk, give you time to get the venom out of your system

MOMS MABLEY

(Backing down)

Now, he's callin me a snake.

LUTHER

You called me a viper.

MOMS MABLEY

"Super-mammy"...I told a honky what I'm now tellin you. I ain't no damn mammy!

(Near tears)

I got a sable coat, a Rolls Royce, diamond rings, a split-level house, a safe deposit bank box...full-a green backed pictures of presidents. Learn some respect.

(He takes out car keys, places them on table... turns to leave.)

Listen, boy, if you go for a walk...keep walkin. Now, ...let's play cards.

ADELE

Luther, don't leave us...please don't leave us.

(LUTHER exits. Moms and Adele sit down away from each other. LIGHT CHANGE. Time pause. 5sec˙)

ADELE

(To Audience)

And so, he left. Y'know, you can hold some-body too close, whatcha call possessive. On my day off, Moms gave me a party...so I couldn't go away.

(Brings Moms her funny hat, shoes and dress.)

Moms? It's been three days now. You got a show to do. Shall we cancel the engagement?

MOMS MABLEY

(Putting on her outfit)

No. Such as he was...Luther had a kinda magic about him. He was all the men I've ever known...all the children. Why should I care.

(Smouldering anger)

I pray for him, myself. Turn him right over to heaven. I let go...my hands are clean...

ADELE

All right, all right, now.

(After brief pause.)

Half hours in... And fifteen...now it's five minutes...And you're on.

MOMS MABLEY

(Suddenly fast and bright Walks downstage...singing)

There's instant coffee, instant tea
Everything happenin instantly
So why, pretty baby, why, pretty baby
Why does it take you so long

There's instant soup, instant rice
Instant cookies that taste so nice
So why, pretty baby, why, pretty baby

Why does it take you so long

(Spoken)

Everything, jumps on the double quick time
Oh, honey, can't you see
Here I am waitin, you're hesitatin
When you gonna find some time for me

(Laughs)

Oh, children, Moms is glad to see you. You know, whenever a
OLE man comes near me...I say, "Let's us both find somebody young,
so we can smell perfume stead-a liniment. Tell you the truth, I'd rather pay a young man's way to California than tell a OLE
man the distance.

There's instant coffee, instant tea
Everything hap'nin instantly
So why, pretty baby, why, pretty baby
Why does it take you so long

There's instant bread, instant rice
Instant cookies that taste so nice
So why, pretty baby, why, pretty baby
Why does it take you so long

Everything jumps on the double-quick time
Oh, honey, can't you see
Here I am waitin, you're hesitatin
When you gonna find some time for me

There's instant drinks, lemon and lime
Made in a jiffy to save you time
So why, pretty baby, why, pretty baby
Why does it take you so long
Why does it take you so long?

Thank you children...I been in love...once with Cab Calloway...in a sensible way, when he was much younger. Used to dream of his hair spread cross my pillow...and my teeth on the dresser. I also loved Count-Basie...in a sensible way. But most men...they don't act right. All women agree on that...men act lousy...except if the man is their son...then they say the women tryin to trap him, trick him, or look for a meal ticket. That's why the women's movement moves so damn slow...caus most of em got a son or a brother they protectin from the rest of us. Well, all of you out there, male, female, heteros, homos, transvests, trans-sex, bi-sex and anything new that Moms may not have heard bout... take care, peace, be kind to those who not exactly like you...and may the good Lord take a likin to you.. love one another.

SOUND:TAPE OF CROWD CHEERING.

MOMS MABLEY

(Steps aside)

Adele, where are you?

(ADELE appears)

Find that S˙ O˙ B˙ Luther so I can fire him.

ADELE

Moms, curtain call, take your call.

(Moms vamps on stage, does double takes, grimaces and does a comic step exit)

LIGHTS: Down and out.

END OF ACT ONE

Act 2

ACT TWO

Sc˙ HOME
MUSIC: "Piano Player"
on tape.
ADELE...is waiting up for MOMS.
SOUND: Phone rings.
ADELE answers.
MUSIC out.

ADELE

Hello? She's not home. Oh, that's too bad. Well, I sure will tell her. Thanks for calling.

(ADELE jots down message) MOMS enters wearing a well tailored man's suit...and one of her hats. She does her shuffle-strut entrance ...pops her fingers.

MOMS MABLEY

I had me a good time. I been in a bar and grill. I am drunk!

ADELE

(To audience)

I don't believe that.

MOMS MABLEY

But I didn't, drink. Got high on my own feelings. And didn't, give one thought to that low-down, no-good Luther. When I woke up this mornin I didn't think bout him either. I said..."God-baby, thank you for not lettin me think bout that wretched, no-count boy.

(Starts changing clothes)

ADELE

(Deliberately changing the subject)

Moms, you just sat round the bar and didn't BUY anything?

MOMS MABLEY

That Luther couldn't-a done it. He'd-a been drinkin. I was so glad to be someplace all by myself. Rode there with a nice cab driver. I never been so happy in my life! Good riddance to bad rubbish, whose name begins with an "L".

ADELE

(Trying to change subject. She hands MOMS her robe.)

You didn't buy anything a-tall at the bar and grill?

MOMS MABLEY

I ordered some of their grill. Barbecued ribs. If Luther was present, he'd-a been sayin..."I don't eat pork." That's not nice...when other people sittin there who do eat it. That's another reason I'm so glad he's gone.

ADELE

Forget Luther.

MOMS MABLEY

Forgotten, completely forgotten. The memory is gone... like last years snow.

ADELE

(Hates to say it...but)

Moms, you loved him and so did I...but let's don't call his name anymore.

MOMS MABLEY

Well, stop bringin it up.

ADELE

I hope you had a good time in the bar.

MOMS MABLEY

A ball!

ADELE

I wish you hadn't worn that suit. Makes you look...look like...

MOMS MABLEY

Like what?

ADELE

Like...too rough.

MOMS MABLEY

(Still changing clothes. Underwear is lacey "Teddies".)

It was a rough bar. And I was there alone cause you-know-who walked out on me. Anything goes in that bar. It's a wear-what-you-want, say-what-you-want, do-what-you-want-but-know-what-you-doin kinda place. I felt perfectly at home.

(Plays to audience)

This fella and his little pet dog was at the bar...Fella says "I'd like a double tequilla sunrise with a twist of lemon." Bartender say..."We don't allow animals in here." Fella said...I oughta sic my dog on you." Bartender say..."Go head, do it." Fella say, "Sic him, Napoleon." Dog went...

(swish manner)

..."Bow-wow-wow-wow." Everybody was rollin. Fella then say..."This dog speaks perfect English. He's a talkin dog." Bartender say..."Lemmie hear him." Fella say... if you give me a free tequilla sunrise. He got his drink...and say "Napoleon, tell him what covers the top of a house?" Dog say... "RrrrrooF!" Fella then say..."Now, how's times out there on the street?" Dog say... "Rrrrruff!" Then he say..."Tell him what's my cousin's name." Dog say ..."Rrrroof". Bartender got mad, snatched both of em and sent em sprawlin out the door...slid in cross the sidewalk, inta the gutter. I went to see if they was hurt. Fella was sittin there bawlin the dog OUT. "You let me down, you should-a said more and said it better." Dog say..."That bartender was so rude I thought It best to be brief."

ADELE

(Laughing)

Moms, you oughta stop lyin.

MOMS MABLEY

(Behind screen, dressing for HOSPITAL scene.)

Wherever you-know-who might be, I don't wish him any harm.

ADELE

Let's not call him you-know-who.

MOMS MABLEY

I been try in to give myself to somebody all my life.

ADELE

I know it.

MOMS MABLEY

Most "friends"...when they down, they can't see enough of you. Let em rise high and they run. Bet Luther's giggin round, makin good, don't know his old pals. Out in Hollywood, they ALL like that.

ADELE

Not everybody.

MOMS MABLEY

Name one who's not.

ADELE

Lena Horne.

MOMS MABLEY

That's right. She's a special kind-a lady, never forgets old friends. Welcomed me warmly. Introduced me proudly. She understands pain and cares about people,

ADELE

I care aboutcha.

MOMS MABLEY

Good old, true blue.

(Sings)

YOU'RE NICER THAN LUTHER

You're nicer than Luther
Never tell many lies
When you say you love me
You can look in my eyes

You're truer than Luther
I can go anywhere
Whenever I return
I know you'll be here

Luther was so mean to me
Broke my poor heart in two
I believe that's a thing
That you'll never do

You're kinder than Luther
I think you're just fine
But I must see Luther
Just...one more time.

(Spoken)

Adele, find him...so I can fire him.

ADELE

I'll try. Somebody kinda close to you is down sick.

MOMS MABLEY

Not one-a the children...

ADELE

No. The guy who used to hang out front-a the theatre whenever you played the Howard, in Washington. You always said... "There he is, holdin down the sidewalk so it won't fly away.

MOMS MABLEY

Aw, girl, that's Jack Mabley...old lover...the guy whose name I took, cause he had nothin else to give me. We worked vaudeville together...T˙ O˙ B˙ A˙ The company that booked the "colored" acts. T˙ O˙ B˙ A˙ Mongst ourselves we called it...tough on black ass. Jack Mabley...goes a long ways back. Dell, ...I need to get down quiet for awhile.

ADELE

I know.

(ADELE exits to play THE NURSE in HOSPITAL scene.)

MOMS MABLEY

(During the following, Moms completes dressing for the HOSPITAL scene...nice dress, hat, purse, shoes.)

(TO AUDIENCE)

Jack Mabley, he's all the guys that went through early show biz. Goes back to 19 hundred and 10. They used to tell them old slave jokes. One slave say to the other..."Guess what? I went inside the house and run my hand up under ole Mistis dress." Second slave ask, "What'd she say, what'd she do?" First one say..."She didn't, say or do nothin." Second one went in. In no time he come sailin out with his head whipped, then he hollered..."How come ole Mistis didn't have you beat when you run your hand under her dress?" First guy say..."Cause her dress was hangin behind the door!" Then they'd throw their hands up and go..."Well-a Kee-kee-kee, and a-ka-ka-ka." ...Jack Mabley. Also there was one bout how... a slave owner told the little FIVE year old slave boy..."Well, Referimus, you put in ten hours of cotton pickin... so, ah tell you what...reach inta that barrel and grab a handfulla jaw-breaker candy." Referimus say..."Nawsuh, I ain' gonna put my han' in your candy. Please, suh, YOU give it to me." The slave owner say..."Well, there you are. You a nice timid fella." Referimus wasn't timid...he knew the slave master's hand was bigger than his. A-kee-kee-kee-kee-kee, and a-kee-kee-ka-ka-ka. Jack and me, we worked them one-nighters, bus and truck shows, on the road. If the folks liked you, they threw money, if not... they threw bricks and soda bottles. Jack Mabley once got hit on the knee with a Mae West Coca-Cola bottle. Poor fella, told a joke that, didn't go over. After that he walked kinda lop-sided. Well, the years go by and our days wind down.

LIGHTS down as Moms exits. LIGHTS up on...HOSPITAL ROOM. (Nurse is reading Jacks temperature. He is in bed, half asleep.)

Sc˙ Hospital

NURSE

He's failing fast.

MOMS MABLEY

How much longer?

NURSE

Maybe... another day or so.

MOMS MABLEY

Good, he owes me ten bucks. I got time to collect.

NURSE

Oh, dear, oh, my.

MOMS MABLEY

That's a joke.

NURSE

He's asleep.

(During the following she performs nurses tasks Marking his chart, adjusting bed etc˙)

MOMS MABLEY

Hey, Jack, wake up you old rascal. It's Moms..Moms Mabley!.

JACK

You may be "Moms" to everybody else, but you Loretta-Mary to me. I'm bout to make my final curtain call. The lights comin down for the last big blackout.

MOMS MABLEY

She say the grim reaper is waitin in the wings.

NURSE

Oh, my. Oh, dear.

MOMS MABLEY

But you gon get better.

JACK

No, I'm gon die. Pray for me Retta, like you pray.

MOMS MABLEY

(Looks heavenward)

Saint Pete! Now, yall let him in. Jack started out as a minstrel man. He's sorry he became a hustler, a gambler and a whatever else...

JACK

Easy, Retta, easy now.

MOMS MABLEY

But he did the best he could... with what yall gave him. Some of us get short-changed, you know.

JACK

(To audience)

One time I went to jail...but I served my time.

MOMS MABLEY

A long stretch.

JACK

And you didn't, come to visit, me but twice.

MOMS MABLEY

Visit? Finger printin me, searchin my pocketbook, pattin me down, you don't Just drop in on Sing-Sing, y'know.

NURSE

Let's not dwell on sad memories.

JACK

Yeah, dammit, dwell on it. All I did was bank numbers, write policy slips. But, ain't the govmint takin over gamblin? Politicians legalizin lottery, settin up off-track bettin... slot machine, blackjack, roulette. But who serve time...me, that's who!

MOMS MABLEY

(Heavenward again)

Yall hear that?

NURSE

You're exciting the patient?

JACK

Yeah, excite me! Loretta-Mary, tell me one-a your jokes.

MOMS MABLEY

Old man was married to this younger woman...they had ten girl children,...then they had a boy. He ran to the bar, bought drinks for his friends, handin out see-gars... "I got a boy, at last a boy." One mean guy, a spoil sport, say... "You sure that boy is yours? I was you I'd QUESTION my wife bout that." He flew home..." Woman, swear on the BIBLE, is that boy mine?" She say, "Yeah, daddy, he's your's,...but I don't know bout the ten girls, though.

(Nurse laughs)

JACK

(laughs and applauds)

She was cheatin on him all...all...along!

MOMS MABLEY

Shut up, Jack, a mouse is on your shoulder, he's ready to climb in your mouth.

JACK

(Weakly balling his fists.)

Let him come, a cat crawled down there yestiddy. Tell you what I'm gonna do...I'm leavin you all the YOUNG men in this world, they ALL yours...that's in my will.

MOMS MABLEY

I went out with a young man last week. He brought me home, I turned the lights low, put on soft music...and said ..."Take off Mom's dress." He did. I said take off Mom's shoes." He did. "And take off my girdle." Oh, he did, Then I said..."And don't you ever let me catch you wearin Moms things again."

(They all laugh)

While we were out, a man asked him ..."Can you tell me where the 42nd. St˙ Ferry is. He said "Speaking Darling." I said..."Hush, you little queen." He say..."I'm not a queen, my mother's still living." I'm a princess.

JACK

I'm gon die laughin at her lies. What'd you bring me? I'm sick-a horse-spittle food.

MOMS MABLEY

(Takes platter out of her shopping bag)

Barbecued ribs, fried chicken, candy sweet potatoes, collard greens, cracklin bread...

NURSE

That'll kill him..

JACK

But the condemned man ate a hearty meal!

NURSE

No matter how lively he seems, he IS going to die.

MOMS MABLEY

Cause yall gon see to it.

NURSE

I should call a doctor and a minister.

JACK

Let the minister stand here and the doctor there... So I can die like Christ...between two thieves.

(Nurse throws up her hands and exits. Jack snatches I˙V˙ from his arm. Touches one finger to barbecue, licks it.)

JACK

Ribs...good and hot.

MOMS MABLEY

West Indian pepper sauce and jalopena peppers...mixed.

JACK

You big time now, ain't you?

MOMS MABLEY

Was on television with Harry Belafonte...and Merv Griffin. I'm gon make a movie..."Amazin Grace".

JACK

I'm glad. Hear you bought a house...and a Rolls Royce.

MOMS MABLEY

All it's good for is haulin groceries.

JACK

Still got a piano player...a Luther?

MOMS MABLEY

Had one...till last week.

JACK

How come?

MOMS MABLEY

He's a stubborn, vain, likker-head...exactly like you... when you were young.

JACK

I wish I had better memories to remember...to feel proud.

MOMS MABLEY

You made a lotta people laugh.

JACK

One time I fell in love...hard, for real.

MOMS MABLEY

With who?

JACK

With you...Loretta-Mary was one pretty girl.

MOMS MABLEY

You was too triflin to love anybody.

JACK

A man needs to be a good provider. What'd I have? A blackface act...and damn few bookin's. One good thing bout burnt cork...you can hide your feelin's behind it. Woman, I was lovin you...all while I was actin the fool.

MOMS MABLEY

(Touched)

Stop lyin.

JACK

You the one never could admit you loved anybody.

MOMS MABLEY

I was waitin...lookin for the thrill. Where is the thrill? What's it like...I wonder. In the middle-a the night I'm thinkin sorta...there's a fruit I never tasted...some person I'm spose to meet...some sound I'm to hear...maybe a new song. Then...I feel sad...like it's out there but I keep missin it, y'know? I wanted to be...no, you'll laugh.

JACK

I won't, tell nobody but Saint Pete.

MOMS MABLEY

Years back, I saw myself as the Soubrette. The pretty girl... who sweetened the bitter taste-a minstrel jokes...The soubrette, all in white lace...flowers and ribbons. Bet my cousin would-a been proud-a me...if I'd-a been lovely and singin.

JACK

Aw, Retta, I can see you doin it...

(Adele enters as the Soubrette. She carries a lace parasol, wears a lacey stole and hat.)

MOMS MABLEY

You can?

JACK

Sure...singin a love song...lookin good.

SOUBRETTE

(Moves slowly, with old fashioned grace and charm. As she sings... Moms and Jack watch her perform.)

LOVING YOU

If loving you means everything I have dear
If loving you means all my living days
Let loving you be all I ever know dear
Let loving you last longer than always

If loving you means that all others leave me
I'll tell you now, although it's plain to see
I'm forever yours, Oh, please believe me
All my life I'll go on loving you.

(Soubrette daintily moves around stage... then off.)

JACK

Y'see, I'm a ole bachelor cause I couldn't, be a good provider. Playin them hick towns just after a lynchin...and Jim Crow all the way. Only good thing bout some damn towns...is that you know you gon soon be leavin. And you missed the most gritty part like back in nineteen hundred and one...

MOMS MABLEY

Oh, yeah? I was born in eighteen hundred and ninety five...that makes me plenty one.

JACK

I go back little further...so I'm plenty nine...

(Angry)

And nothin to show for it. Black and poor...that's a bad combination.

MOMS MABLEY

Anyway, you gave the world a lotta laughs.

JACK

Had no schoolin, didn't wanta pick cotton or shovel coal, so,.. such as it was...I went for show business.

MOMS MABLEY

Well, some of it was good.

JACK

But I never got to do my imitation of the great Bert Willams.

MOMS MABLEY

The comedian...made it into Ziegfield's Follies.

Died ...nineteen hundred and twenty two...just forty seven years old. Master-interpreter of the human condition.

MOMS MABLEY

(In awe)

With black-face comedy.

JACK

Oh, but he did some serious things,...one bout Black men in the Mexican-American War. Political stuff always got cut out of shows. Y'know... "Makes the audience unhappy."

MOMS MABLEY

I know it.

JACK

I put that number in one-a my acts. And I never made it. "That's too serious" for black-face." So...I'm goin to my grave...never-ever-dammit... doin it.

MOMS MABLEY

Do it, Jack, do your Bert Williams.

(He yanks out I˙ V˙)

Don't pull that.

JACK

(Holds Moms arm. Is suddenly, angrily in need of performing. Manages to stand-sit, near foot, of bed.)

Hush. Best-a my recollection, it was called..."I'm Gone Before I Go,...went, somethin like...

(Chant-sings)

Patriotism always has been uppermost with me
I used to row out every day and kiss Miss Liberty
A friend of mine named Samuel Brown
Who lives next door to me...uptown
Had heard of war in Mexico
And said..."I'm goin down"...
A hero he was gonna be

(Trying to remember)

Somethin, somethin, somethin...then it went...
I envied him, so I enlisted
When I heard those war-time bugles blow
Goodbye, I said, I'm on my way to Mexico
Duty is calling me

Since then I heard
They hung my friend up on a sour apple tree
So...I guess I'm gone before I go
"Sam Brown's body lies a-mouldin in the ground..."
I guess I'm gone before I go

Fifteen dollars and sixty cent... is a heroe's pay
...special ones get fresh-cut flowers on decoration day
Then I say...Goodbye...I'm on my way to Mexico
Duty is calling me...and somethin, then...
They hung my friend up on a sour apple tree
"Sam Brown's body lies a-mouldin in the ground..."
Guess I'm gone before I go
Gone before I go...

"Too serious." They said.

(Slumps down on the bed... Reaches under his pillow...for a half pint and takes a swig)

MOMS MABLEY

Jack! You drinkin whiskey! How the hell you get it?

JACK

Money buys anything, anywhere, anytime.

(CHANTS...to tease)

"Guess I'll be gone before I go..."

MOMS MABLEY

Put a worm in a glass-a water, it'll swim round...just as happy. Drop him in a glass-a whiskey, dammit, he will die. What does that tell you?

JACK

(Laughs but weakening)

Tells me...if I drink whiskey, I won't get worms.

MOMS MABLEY

You look like him, sound like him, exactly like that hard-headed, likker-drinkin, good-lookin, two-timin piano player...LUTHER. Jack Mabley, dammit-to-hell, I don't know what to do with you!

JACK

Loretta Mary, I don't wanta be mad with you. I found out that everlastin love...ain't bout bein IN love, or MAKIN love... ...it just goes free and easy... "love one another"...that's what it is, y'know?

MOMS MABLEY

(Touched)

Anything you want me to do?

JACK

When it's that time...remember me kindly, if you can think of anything. And... sing me a song.

MOMS MABLEY

Which one?

JACK

Anything you pick.

(Takes her hand, holds it to his cheek. After a beat or two)

It's time for us to say so-long.

MOMS MABLEY

(Hates to leave. Takes shopping bag etc˙)

I'll be back.

JACK

But...call first. I might step out for a cold beer.

MOMS MABLEY

(Her back's to Jack...as she walks away.)

Man, if you need me...

JACK

Don't turn round, Retta. Satchel Paige always say...never look back, somethin might be gainin on you.

MOMS MABLEY

(Doesn't look back)

And you keep thinkin bout that little Soubrette.

(Waits...there's no answer)

Well, later.

(She exits toward stage right. He picks up his his pillow etc˙ Exits stage left.)

Scene: Home.

ADELE

(At telephone, winding up conversation.)

Yes, I will...I see, thank you. We'll be in touch.

(ADELE takes out a pack of cigarettes...from a drawer, or somewhere...and a packet of long matches. MOMS enters...from hospital. ADELE hands her a cigarette, MOMS takes it. ADELE strikes match and offers a light.)

MOMS MABLEY

I'll smoke it dry. The cancer is in the match. Lightin up is what gives cancer.

ADELE

Sad news about your friend, Jack Mabley.

MOMS MABLEY

What's to be done?

ADELE

They're passing the hat for expenses.

MOMS MABLEY

No, none-a that. I'll pick up his tab. Lay out my clothes. Dell. It's time to mourn, help me to mourn.

(ADELE sings an old spiritual as she selects MOMS black clothing. Mom begins to shed the hospital outfit.)

DEATH AIN' NOTHIN BUT A ROBBER

Death ain' nothin but a robber, can'tcha see, don'tcha know
Death ain' nothin but a robber, can'tcha see, don'tcha know
He come to your house, he don' stay long
Look in the bed and your baby is gone
Death ain' nothin but a robber, can'tcha see, don'tcha know

Death ain' nothin but a robber, can'tcha see, don'tcha know
Death ain' nothin but a robber, can'tcha see, don'tcha know

MOMS MABLEY

Mourn, lady, sing it.

ADELE

(Continues singing)

He come to your house, he don' stay long
Look in the bed and your mother is gone
Death ain' nothin but a robber, can'tcha see, don'tcha know

MOMS MABLEY

I see, I know.

ADELE

(Continues singing)

Death ain' nothin but a robber, can'tcha see, don'tcha know
Death ain' nothin but a robber, can'tcha see, don'tcha know
He come to your house, he don stay long
Look in the bed and your brother is gone

MOMS MABLEY

.. God-baby, what is this world all about? A-well...so-long, old performer..

ADELE

Death ain' nothin but a robber, can'tcha see, don'tcha know.

MOMS MABLEY

Thank you my sister.

ADELE

I found Luther. I told him...Moms, wants you to come back, so she can fire you. He said...I'll be there.

MOMS MABLEY

He did?

ADELE

Also said... "I NEED to see her...if just to be fired."

MOMS MABLEY

(Looking at racks of clothing, and clothing in her hands... she is stripped down to her camisole. Addresses audience and Adele. Angry with death ...she takes it out on clothing...and Adele.)

We are born buck naked...then we start this business of dressing. That's how I spent most-a my life.

(Throwing items from rack to floor.)

This, this and this! I don't wanta see that Luther! Goodbye, Jack, OLD BUDDY.

(Adele gives her a dress)

I'm close to the edge. If that Luther shows up, I might blow my cool. Jack Mabley was younger on his death bed ...than that stupid Luther.

ADELE

I'll head him off, or send him away when he gets here.

MOMS MABLEY

Mind your business! Did I ask you to send anybody away?

ADELE

So, let the friggin chips fall where they may!

MOMS MABLEY

(Still tossing down clothing.)

A lifetime of changin from one damn outfit to another. At the end...whatcha got? Black dresses and shrouds! He probably won't show up. Well, if he does, do it your way. Tell him I don't care to see him!

ADELE

(Also stretched thin)

Moms...he said he didn't appreciate you enough...that opportunity only knocks once and...and...

MOMS MABLEY

He wouldn't know opportunity if it bit him in the butt...and you wouldn't either.

(MOMS EXITS...ADELE puts clothing back on the rack.)

ADELE

(To MOMS, with sarcasm)

Thank you!

(To audience)

Damn right, SOME do spend their lives wearin a lotta shit. The rest of us stay busy washin, ironin, and hangin it back up... Busy-busy, work-work, pack the trunk, unpack it. Damn, I look up and my life soon be over.

(LUTHER enters)

And what in the hell do you want?

LUTHER

That's no way to say welcome. You invited me.

ADELE

Okay. How are you?

LUTHER

Fine. I wrote a song for Moms.

ADELE

I am fed up with grouchy people, fed up.

LUTHER

So, why do you stay?

ADELE

Maybe...I hang around just to have a ringside seat at somebody else's main event. Don't you have anyplace to be? Bet you got a wife somewhere.

LUTHER

Yeah, I do. I didn't handle that very well. My fault.

ADELE

A nice, easy-goin fella like you?

LUTHER

Easy-GOIN, that's the word...goin...on one night stands, If you're lucky, maybe a week in Chicago, or L˙ A˙ or N'Orleans. Easy goin. Goin is no way to hold a marriage together. What's your story?

ADELE

(Putting clothes rack in order.)

ALMOST is my word. I almost became a singer...almost. I also almost got married. Once I almost went to Europe with a show. Almost. I always get scratched just before the thing happens, like some favorite race

horses.

(Brightly)

So...I'm here.

LUTHER

(Looking over music.)

That's life.

ADELE

I'm comfortable here. It's a little more than just a job. I don't have any close family. She needs me. It's nice to be needed.

LUTHER

And there are lots of laughs.

ADELE

Moms also has a quiet side...a faithful, a dedicated side. She's a faithful church-goer. When the Senior Mrs˙ King, Martin's mother, was murdered...Moms dropped everything and went down to the funeral. She always helped Adam Clayton Powell at election time...tellin her audience... "Vote for Adam, yall." She liked John F˙ Kennedy. One day she said... "I always had a lot of awareness in me." A lot of awareness. She's a thoughtful woman...when she gets down quiet. So, I'm here.

(Luther goes to the piano...plays a little of "HERE WE GO". MOMS enters dressed in black, wearing a black hat and a long, floaty veil.)

MOMS MABLEY

Dell, pin my veil in place.

LUTHER

(Stands)

Moms, I heard you lost a dear friend. You have my sympathy.

MOMS MABLEY

Thank you.

LUTHER

Sorry I hurt your feelings.

MOMS MABLEY

(Forces herself)

We both could mend our ways.

(They both laugh. Luther plays and sings...)

LUTHER

(During the number MOMS waltzes alone, the veil compliments her graceful movements.)

A WALTZ FOR MOMS

Here we go, at last I've found you
Here we go, this is the start
Here we go, at last we're dancing
Here we go, you have my heart

All life long I've been waiting
For a chance to dance with you
All life long, I've been hoping
To have my arms around you
And promise I will be true

Here we go, we're off together
Here we go, we'll never part....
I wanted you to have some soft music.

MOMS MABLEY

(Very pleased)

Adele, buy two ducks for Luther's dinner. Son, how'dja like to escort a couple-a ladies to a funeral?

LUTHER

Sure. Sorry it's a funeral.

MOMS MABLEY

Don't be too sad. When I was a kid...We used-ta sing... makin fun-a death...the grim reaper. Dell?

(During the number they, sing, step, strut and dance. First, both women play "Death"...riding and furiously whipping his horse...galloping wildly...ADELE, as death, laxly stalks the prey. MOMS becomes "Mama"...and treats "Death" as an equal... playing with him, stepping along to the "end"...with high, good humor...and finally, with arms outstretched ...she meets death, they leap on their horses and ride away.)

DEATH COME A-RIDIN

Wellllllllll....

Death come a-ridin to my mama's door
He say "Come on, mama, are you ready to go?"
My mama sat right down and she put on her shoes
And she looked at her cause, and she could not refuse
And she went on down to the Jordan stream
And say, "Lord, have mercy, I been redeemed

(Exulting)

Yes, God knows it, I done my duty
Put on my travelin shoes"...

Then she walked in the water up to her knees
Say, "Lord, have mercy, I'm bout to freeze

(Shivers from cold)

Yes, God knows it, I done my duty
Put on my travelin shoes"...

Then she walked in the water up to her hip

(One hand on hip)

Say, "Lord, have mercy, don' let me slip
Yes, God knows it, I done my duty
Put on my travelin shoes"...

Then she walked in the water up to her chest
Say, "Lord, have mercy, I wet my vest

(Covers breast)

Yes, God knows it, I done my duty
Got on my travelin shoes"...

Then she walked in the water up to her neck

(Wading)

Say, "Lord, have mercy, I'm a perfect wreck
Yes, God knows it, I done my duty Got on my travelin shoes"...

Then she walked in the water up to her hat
Say, "Thang God, Almighty, I'm done with that,

(Exults)

Yes, God knows it, I done my duty,
Put on my travelin shoes

(They harmonize)

Put on my travelin shoes."

(Riding off with death)

MOMS MABLEY

(Proudly to Luther)

They want me to sing at the funeral parlor.

LUTHER

But not that.

MOMS MABLEY

(Hands him his tape recorder)

No. Lets get on with makin your tapes.

(ADELE is putting on hat and fur boa for the funeral scene.)

LUTHER

You want me to interview you now?

MOMS MABLEY

Yes. Waste no time. Say it all. Life's too short.

LUTHER

All right. How old are you?

MOMS MABLEY

(Putting on her gloves)

There he goes ding-dongin on that again. It is unladylike for a woman to tell her age. I was born. That's enough.

LUTHER

Okay, no age. Was there any great tragedy in your life?

MOMS MABLEY

Yes...death came a-ridin, too fast, too often...My mother was crossin the street in Washington, D˙ C˙..she was run over by a truck...gone. My father was a volunteer fire-man. On the way to a fire, the engine blew up. He lost his life. A young nephew, killed his wife, cause she didn't love him anymore, then he killed himself. A graveyard is not strange ground to me. Also, lots-a other kinda things...When I left my kids with folks, I was missin em so much...Bonnie, Yvonne, Christine and Charles. Tragedy...well, now, I've seen dope hurt and kill people I love... That's tragedy. Ohhh, I've had "friends" talk me down, to hold me back. I told you I been raped, all kindsa abused. Oh, yes, there were days when I didn't know where my next dime was comin from. Through all-a that, I kept tellin funny stories, makin people laugh...even when I was very sad.

(A DISCOVERY)

That's what makes a comedian...heartache behind the fun. I rode from one job to the next...on Jim Crow trains. Had to be in the back of the bus. I played Jim Crow theatres, hollered my funny stories up to the balcony, so my people could hear. I even told jokes with the Ku Klux Klan in the audience. Got em to laughin, so they forgot what mischief they came to do. Some-a that might be why I have a battery hooked up to my heart. A

great comedian knows, first hand, what hardship is about ...then she can make people laugh. I am the Queen of Comedy.

(ADELE is ready to go, drapes moms veil over her hat.)

LUTHER

Moms, you deserve good things, nothing but the best.

MOMS MABLEY

I've had the best,...and so have you...raindrops hittin gainst the window in the evenin, when you sleepy. A hot bath on a snowy night...

ADELE

And how bout the sound of a breeze whispering through tree leaves.

MOMS MABLEY

And all the applause I had from the people. I thank God-baby, for givin me talent, and I thank him for the Civil Rights Movement...that made it better for Moms. It changed the law so Moms didn't have to ride the back-a the bus no more. Well, let's go say so-long to Jack.

(Luther and Adele escort Mom...to the "funeral home". They walk by the "casket"... and take seats.)

MOMS MABLEY

Why they sayin he looks "so natural". A tuxedo is not Jack's style. He liked plaid sport jackets, was very particular bout his threads.

ADELE

Moms, It's your turn...the memorial song.

(Luther escorts Moms...and plays for her.)

MOMS MABLEY

I was very proud when Mercury Records asked me to record a very fine song. No one expected to find it in a MOMS MABLEY collection.

(MOMS sings)

ABRAHAM, MARTIN AND JOHN

Has anybody here seen my old friend Abraham
Can you tell me where he's gone
He freed a lot of people
But it seems the good die young
I just looked around and he was gone.

Has anybody here seen my old friend John
Can you tell me where he's gone

He freed a lot of people
But it seems the good die young
I just looked around and he was gone

Has anybody here seen my old friend Martin Luther
Can you tell me where he's gone
He freed a lot of people
But it seems the the good die young
I just looked around and he was gone

Didn't you love the things they stood for
Didn't they try to find some good, for you and me
And we'll be free some day soon
It's got to be one day

Has anybody here seen my little Bobby
Can you tell me where he's gone
I thought I saw him walking over the hill
With Abraham, Martin and John
They were going home...going home
They were going home

(The trio stroll away from the service. ADELE picks up a sheaf of flowers to be used at Graveside.)

MOMS MABLEY

Look at all the tombstones,... crosses, stars, all kindsa races and religions...

(wryly)

together at last.

ADELE

The others are leaving now...

MOMS MABLEY

Hang around, children. Don't go.

(They linger, stall awhile, then gather at Jack's "grave". They will go through the ritual of dropping flowers in the "grave"...which is below stage level. MOMS speaks to JACK, LUTHER, ADELE and the AUDIENCE)

Well, Jack, the butcher cutcha down. Reminds me of a funny graveyard story. People used to pick on Chinamen.

LUTHER

Chinese people, Moms.

MOMS MABLEY

No, they ain't said that. Said..."You ain' got a Chinaman's chance." The CHINESE PEOPLE changed that. Chinamen's chances are now a lot better than they used to be. As I was sayin...these rude folk watched the

Chinaman put a bowl of rice on his ancestor's grave...so one said, "Hey, Foo-Yung, when you think your relatives gonna come up and eat that rice?" The CHINESE MAN said..."Five minutes after yours come up to smell their flowers."

(Throws a flower in grave.)

Jack, here's one for all the funny stories you told.

(Throws in another flower)

And for playin every small town between Jackson, Mississippi and Atlanta, Georgia. Hey, Jack, when you see him, say thank you to W˙ C˙ Handy.

LUTHER

The St˙ Louis Blues man.

MOMS MABLEY

Early on in this century, W˙ C˙ had his own minstrel show. Once, down South, one-a his performers came down with small pox. The crackers locked the company up in a old empty buildin and sent no doctor. Left em there to die. The actors disguised the sick men as women, and managed to break loose and sneak em out of town for medical care.

(ADELE throws flowers in)

Nother minstrel fella from out West. He and his lady friend were walkin down the street. There had been a snowstorm. Buncha white folk threw snowballs at em...but hard. The fella cursed at em. That night a mob, went to the theatre and stormed the place. They lynched the man, then cut out his tongue and mailed it to his mother, in Chicago. Here's one for a minstrel-man who got lynched.

(LUTHER drops flower in)

...here's for Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Florence Mills...and all of us who didn't try to prove we're just like white folk...

(proudly)

cause we are not JUST LIKE ANYBODY BUT OURSELVES.

(Throwing more flowers)

Jack, here's one from your soubrette. And one for comedians who serve time. A flower for your friend, Bert Williams...

(To audience)

A West Indian comedian and an officer in the 369th. Infantry.

(To Jack)

And this is for the few laughs that weren't on us.

LUTHER

Heavy, Moms, heavy. I see it, I got it. There's greatness in everybody...but, all of us can't be great.

MOMS MABLEY

(Tongue in cheek)

That's right. Somebody has to stand on the curb and cheer when Moms walk by.

(Drops another flower)

Jack! The reason I like young men is cause I don't like the five B's...Bridgework, bi-focals, baldness, a bay window and bunions! By the way...Jack Mabley, why does a chicken cross the road? To get-on-the other side...A-kee-kee-kee-kee-kee, A-ka-ka-kaka-ka.

(To audience)

Children, Jack drank so much, he began to lose his hearing...doctor said, "Stop drinkin, it'll come back. It did ... but then he lost it again. Jack told that doctor... "Nothin I heard was worth one good drink."

MUSIC TAPE...PIANO PLAYER song ...in low and slowly up.

To the greatest comedians in the world....

(Throws in a flower)

POLITICIANS...their stories are funneee...but they just can't make you laugh. Why DOES a chicken cross the road? Luther, Dell, Children, any-a-yall, do me a favor, whenever you see Dick Gregory...ask him that dumb joke... Why does a chicken cross the road? A great comedian like Gregory, He just might find us a new answer.

(One knee buckles. LUTHER and ADELE help her. She insists on standing alone.)

I got it, Children, I got it. Moms is still in charge.

(She turns her back, walks upstage... ...and waits. LUTHER drops a flower in grave...The following speeches are up.)

LUTHER

Moms Mably, was born, Loretta Mary Aiken, May 19th., 1894, ...they say.

ADELE

She left us on May 23, 1975. Her service was at Abyssinia Baptist Church. She was buried at Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, N˙ Y˙

LUTHER

We enjoyed the pleasure of her company.

(LUTHER and ADELE turn and face upstage...as MOMS faces front...and with a proud upward tilt of her head, she is STILL IN CHARGE. One hand held high, she gives a dynamic shake of the tambourine. They walk upstage to meet MOMS...then turn and the three walk downstage for curtain calls.)

MUSIC TAPE UP.

THE END